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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000588

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: POLITICAL DIALOGUE SPITTERS AS HARDLINERS STRIKE  
BACK

REF: DHAKA 578 (EXDIS)

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary  
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¶1. (C) The decision by Bangladesh's major political parties to abstain from the formal dialogue as long as their leaders remain in prison has increased doubts about the likelihood of elections by the end of 2008. The subsequent decision by the security forces to arrest senior politicians and scores of grassroots party leaders may reduce the likelihood of protests in the short run but risks a further hardening of positions over time. In this environment, there has been increased talk of a possible "National Government" taking over from the current Caretaker Government and an indefinite postponement of elections. We continue to emphasize the need for compromise and a process that sets the conditions for free, fair, and credible elections by the end of the year. With only seven months remaining in the Caretaker Government's mandate, Bangladesh appears to be entering a critical phase in its political transition.

Major Parties Boycott Polls  
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¶2. (C) Following two days of deliberation including the party's first expanded meeting with local leaders in seven years, Awami League acting President Zillur Rahman announced May 27 that his party would not participate in the proposed political dialogue without imprisoned leader Sheikh Hasina. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party was quick to follow suit, demanding former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia be released as a precondition for the party's participation in the dialogue. Reacting to the May 18 arrest of Ameer Motiur Rahman Nizami, the Jamaat-e-Islami has also called upon the government to release the three detained leaders to make the dialogue meaningful. Almost unnoticed, other smaller parties continue to meet with the Caretaker Advisers. For their part, the Advisers have pledged to try to convince the major parties to change their minds. A few mid-level AL and BNP leaders hold out some hope this could happen.

¶3. (C) While the parties have publicly presented a unified position regarding participation in the dialogue, their internal divisions, largely related to the issue of the future role of their detained leaders, are becoming increasingly apparent. Within the Awami League, an anti-Hasina group led by Amir Hossain Amu, Abdur Razzak, and Suranjit Sen Gupta is attempting to gain control of the party. Meanwhile, the efforts to reunify the BNP under acting Secretary General Khondker Delwar Hossain have

stalled, with members of the "eformist" faction now reportedly being targeted for retribution by loyalists at the local level. Of all the parties, the Jamaat-e-Islami appears to be the most disciplined and best able to weather the loss of its senior leader. It remains weakened, however, by the continuing controversy over the party's pro-Pakistan stance during the 1971 War of Liberation.

#### Crackdown on Parties Reportedly Underway

¶4. (C) The June 1 morning newspapers in Dhaka led with reports of the previous day's mass arrests of local level party officials throughout Bangladesh. While the Inspector General of Police claimed that this operation by the Joint Forces (police, military, and Rapid Action Battalion) had arrested individuals wanted for a range of crimes, press reports indicated that many detained held influential positions in local party structures. Most of those detained under the Emergency Power Rules were members of the AL and BNP: there are estimates that over 500 individuals have been arrested through June 1. The press has speculated that this campaign will continue, and many party workers have gone into hiding. Some see the arrests as a move to preempt possible demonstrations. They may also be an attempt to tilt the internal balance of power within the parties away from the imprisoned leaders.

¶5. (C) Following the arrests of Jamaat Ameer Nizami, and former BNP Ministers M.K. Anwar, Shamsul Islam, and Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan in a corruption case involving former Prime

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Minister Zia, leaders of the political parties fear that they may be targeted as part of the anti-corruption drive. Awami League Presidium Member Tofail Ahmed, along with his wife and daughter, have been charged with submitting a false wealth report. Ahmed, who in the days after January 11, 2007 had been identified with the AL's reformist group, has protested his innocence and claimed that he is the target of political persecution. On May 31, Ahmed claimed that over 1,000 party supporters had visited his home to express support. Meanwhile, Jamaat Secretary General Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojahid failed in his attempt to obtain bail in the Barapukuria corruption case in which he has been implicated.

On May 31, Jatiya Party Secretary General Ruhul Amin Howlader told us that the Anti Corruption Commission had opened an investigation into his finances. Taken together, some politicians and others believe that this is part of a campaign to remove the leadership of the parties, particularly those who remain loyal to their detained leaders. In the local shorthand, "Minus Two" has been replaced by "Minus 200," i.e. the decimation of the senior levels of the parties. That said, almost all of these individuals have been under investigation on credible corruption charges for months.

#### Rumors of National Government Proliferate

¶6. (C) The prospect of a failed dialogue, and the arrests of those loyal to the detained former Prime Ministers, have fueled rumors that some may be preparing to impose a "National Government" and postpone elections. A handful of politicians tell us that they have openly advocated this option, and even a few respected members of civil society appear willing to sacrifice elections for the promise of stability. The vernacular press is full of rumors that such a "national government" could be formed in the coming months, under the leadership of a neutral respected figure, e.g. a former Chief Justice. Such a government might decide to seek a mandate through a referendum to continue reforms and postpone the return to parliamentary democracy. There is no indication that the population at large would support such a move, however.

## Embassy Stresses Need for Compromise Leading to Elections

17. (C) In this politically charged environment, we have used our public and private comments to emphasize the importance of adhering to the CTG's electoral roadmap and holding elections by the end of 2008. In his speech to the Bangladesh Political Scientists Association on May 31, the Ambassador stressed the importance of strengthening institutions and holding elections. The Ambassador also urged both the Government and the parties to negotiate in good faith and be willing to compromise to reach a mutually agreeable solution. We are coordinating with like-minded diplomats and will continue to press these points with the government. We are also seeking an explanation from the CTG for the recent wave of arrests and plan to caution the government against actions that would poison the atmosphere for elections.

Comment

18. (C) One Bangladeshi political observer commented that his countrymen like to build up idols, only to tear them down. He used this analogy to explain the CTG's current predicament. The government entered with a strong mandate in January 2007 and enjoyed the support of both the domestic and international community. Few doubt the sincerity of the CTG in wanting to hand over power to an elected government by the end of the year. Given Bangladesh's lack of a culture of political compromise, however, the CTG faces a challenge in creating an environment conducive to elections by the end of the year. As time passes, the hardliners on both sides may choose to dig in and try to have their way through force rather than through negotiations. It will be critical for the USG and others in the international community to remain engaged. We are not in the endgame yet, but the options available are beginning to diminish.

Moriarty